

**Great Lakes State Park Bills**  
Committee on Tourism, Outdoor Recreation, and Natural Resources  
Michigan House of Representatives  
May 22, 2007

Honorable Representatives and Committee Members:

I would like to thank you for considering a set of bills that will both recognize the establishment of the “Great Lakes State Park” in 1899, and enhance underwater recreation and tourism in Michigan. These are topics of particular interest to professional associates of the Center for Maritime & Underwater Resource Management, a Michigan nonprofit scientific and educational organization dedicated to the preservation of maritime heritage and to sustainable coastal tourism.

I am providing testimony today as president of the Center as well as a social scientist with nearly 30 years of academic education and professional experience in the fields of coastal recreation and tourism, and underwater archaeology. My career has taken me to premier dive tourism destinations around the United States, and in the western Pacific and Caribbean Basin.

I will first provide some perspectives on the Great Lakes State Park before offering comments on the three bills being considered by this Committee. The original intent of the Michigan Legislature is obvious from the title of P.A. 171 of 1899, “An Act to set aside the submerged and swamp lands in the State of Michigan bordering upon the Great Lakes and bayous thereof as a *public park*, defining the limits thereof and providing for its care and management.” Former Attorney General Frank Kelley reasoned in a 1976 opinion that “these lands were set apart and dedicated as a *state park*.”

Since 1899, the primary care and management of this public park has been assigned to the counties, and then transferred, in turn, to the State Board of Control, Public Domain Commission, Department of Conservation, and now, the Department of Natural Resources. The Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act, Public Act 451 of 1994, transferred certain responsibilities for environmental protection from the Department of Natural Resources to the Department of Environmental Quality. In addition, the Department of History, Arts, and Libraries was granted certain permitting responsibilities to enhance preservation of aboriginal records, antiquities, and abandoned cultural properties within the Great Lakes.

Under the public trust doctrine, these state agencies function as our trustees for submerged lands, overlying surface waters, aquatic organisms, and cultural heritage found within these unique freshwater lakes. This same doctrine also protects traditional uses of the Great Lakes such as boating, fishing, swimming, and beach-walking.

Through the years, Michigan has invested heavily in infrastructure for public access and recreation within the Great Lakes State Park. Eleven bottomland (or underwater) preserves have been established that provide a focus for community-led stewardship of historic shipwrecks and other natural and cultural heritage. About half of our state park system is located on one of the Great Lakes. In addition, Michigan has an abundance of public harbors, marinas, and launch sites to enhance recreational boating, fishing, and scuba diving.

When considering the dual mission of parks to provide for preservation of natural and cultural resources *and* for public enjoyment of the same, it becomes clear that the Great Lakes have been managed primarily as a public park since at least the 1960s, when Michigan began its renown experiments in salmon introductions as a means of correcting an ecological imbalance, and to enhance opportunities for recreational fishing. I believe it is long overdue, therefore, to legislatively recognize the foresight of our 1899 Michigan Legislature as well as give this public park a formal name – the *Great Lakes State Park*.

The state agency with the principal statutory authority for parks and outdoor recreation in Michigan is the Department of Natural Resources. House Bill No. 4640, therefore, wisely authorizes the Department of Natural Resources and the Natural Resources Commission to take primary responsibility for management of the Great Lakes State Park. This is consistent with Part 761 Aboriginal Records, Antiquities, and Abandoned Property of the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act of 1994, which also directs the Department of Natural Resources and the Natural Resources Commission to take primary responsibility for management of Michigan underwater preserves as well as abandoned cultural property lying on or within Great Lakes submerged lands.

House Bill No. 4639 changes the name of the state advisory committee created under Part 761 to reflect the existence of the Great Lakes State Park while still recognizing certain rights of maritime salvage under federal Admiralty Law. House Bill No. 4638 diversifies representation on the Great Lakes State Park and Salvage Advisory Committee to include agency

professionals directly involved in park and recreation planning, and tourism research and marketing. It also provides certain categories of public membership in order to assure that key stakeholders in underwater recreation and tourism are seriously involved in deliberations of the state advisory committee.

Finally, House Bill 4638 directs the Great Lakes State Park and Salvage Advisory Committee to perform additional functions that are reflective of a more professional, scientific approach to resource management. This includes preparation of guidelines for the discovery of shipwrecks, criteria for submission and review of permits, recommendations for promotion of the park, and recommendations for funding of certain park programs and projects. I hope that an active and engaged state advisory committee will also work together in the future to recommend additional legislative amendments and administrative changes that advance the mission and public benefits of the Great Lakes State Park.

These are welcome amendments to Part 761 that will enhance underwater recreation and tourism in Michigan, without neglecting important needs in environmental protection and historic preservation. The proposed makeup and functions of the Great Lakes State Park and Salvage Advisory Committee will also better reflect this dual mission of park management, and provide a stronger foundation for partnerships among state agencies and recreation and tourism providers in private sector. I support, therefore, House Bills No. 4638, 4639, and 4640 without further amendment.

In conclusion, what will the Great Lakes State Park mean to Michigan? The opportunities in tourism destination marketing become obvious in comparison with other states. My research indicates that the Great Lakes State Park is the largest public park established in the history of the United States. At more than 38,000 square miles (over 24 million acres), it is 15 times the area of the Wood-Tikchik State Park in Alaska (currently promoted as the largest state park in America), over four times the total acreage of the Adirondack Park in the State of New York (currently promoted as the largest publicly protected area in the contiguous United States), nearly twice the area of the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve in Alaska (the nation's largest national park), and over 10 times the area of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (the nation's largest marine protected area).

When the acreage of the Great Lakes State Park is added to the acreage of other state and federal lands available for public recreation, an impressive one-half of Michigan's total land and water area is devoted to public parks and recreation areas. No state east of the Great Plains can make such a claim.

In addition, the symbolic and educational values of the Great Lakes State Park should *not* be underestimated – the Great Lakes are one of the most unique and significant freshwater ecosystems on earth, containing about 20% of the world's surface supply. These lakes influence nearly every aspect of life in Michigan, from the maritime climate that allows fruit production on our western shores to winter storms that bring snow far inland; from early settlement of our coasts to industrial development (and re-development) of our state; from waterborne commerce to our recreational pursuits and quality of life. The Great Lakes State Park will celebrate this uniqueness and significance with all citizens of Michigan. It is a symbol we can all embrace, no matter what walk-of-life, or political affiliation.

Sincerely,

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